

Hidden

persuaders

Exploring the promise and the perils of the new unconscious.

BY JEREMY MERCER

IN THE SUMMER OF 2009, A GROUP of students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was recruited for what appeared to be a study on bargaining techniques. The students were seated in an office, shown a new car listed at \$16,500 and told to get the best possible price. Offers were made and rejected, deals were struck and then the students went on their way, satisfied it had been a straightforward exercise in negotiation.

Instead, this was a remarkable experiment to see if people could be unconsciously influenced through their sense of touch. Half the students sat in hard wooden seats during the bargaining sessions, while the other half were given soft cushioned chairs. Those on hard chairs were less flexible in their negotiations and, without exception, offered less money—on average, \$347 less—to purchase the car. The

conclusion was emphatic: Hard surfaces make people “harder” in their negotiations because the physical sensation of hardness triggers concepts of stability, which the unconscious brain translates into a more confident bargaining position.

This “hard chair effect” is part of a torrent of new research that is unlocking the mysteries of the human unconscious and showing how its enormous powers can be harnessed. At every moment of our lives, we are bombarded by far more sensations—sights, sounds, odors, tastes, textures—than our conscious brains can process. This means the vast majority of these stimuli are acted on by our unconscious brains and alter our behavior without our awareness. Over the past decade, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists have been gradually decoding this unconscious operating system and can now tap

into it to induce everything from cleanliness to cleverness in unwitting subjects.

“Our brain’s systems evolved for millions of years with no conscious direction,” says John Bargh, the Yale University psychologist who helped devise the hard chair experiment and a pioneer of the science of the new unconscious. “This unconscious machinery is still there, and it can be used to do all kinds of promising things.”

Promising is an understatement. Want to make a person more pliable? No problem. Just sit them down in a comfortable chair. Trying to make a good impression during a job interview? Give your prospective employer a hot drink and their unconscious brain will make you appear “warmer” and friendlier. Looking to increase donations during a charity drive? A spritz of Windex in the air promotes generosity because the concept of clean is unconsciously tied to